Bethmann, Erich Waldemar (1902–1993)

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Erich Waldemar Bethmann was a linguist, Islamic scholar, and a pioneer Seventh-day Adventist missionary and pastor in the Middle East whose literary work and monograph about Arabs and Muslims became widely known outside Adventist circles.

Early Life

Erich Waldemar Bethmann was born in Berlin in 1902. Not much is known about his parents. His mother seems to have been wealthy for Bethmann "inherited a considerable estate from his mother."[1] Unfortunately, this estate was wiped out in Germany's ruinous inflation of the 1920s.

Education and Mission Work

Following his secondary education, Bethmann attended the Seventh-day Adventist mission seminary in Friedensau, Germany, before proceeding to Stanborough Missionary College near Watford, England, and to the Livingstone Institute in London where he studied Islam.[2] While in Friedensau and under the influence of the school director, Wilhelm Mueller, Bethmann, along with Wilhelm Lesovsky, studied for the first time questions related to mission among Muslims.

In 1925,[3] when Bethmann landed in the Middle East as a young missionary with his Serbian-born wife, Zora, he began by taking courses in Arabic Language and "Islamics" [Islam] at the School of Oriental Studies and at the Al Azhar University of Cairo in Egypt. Joining forces with fellow missionaries George Keough, Walter K. Ising, and Wilhelm Lesosvky, the years following 1927 saw Bethmann engaged in educational and ministerial work, and in translating literature into Arabic from English. Fluent in Arabic, Bethmann worked as a pastor for four years at Assiut in Upper Egypt,[4] in Jordan (1933-1936), and Iraq (1936-39). Before moving to Iraq, Bethmann baptized two men along with their wives and labored to establish another small company of believers in Amman, establishing the Adventist Church in the difficult terrain of the capital of Transjordan.[5]

The difficulty of doing mission in the Middle East led to the formation of a committee at the 1935 general workers meeting of Adventist workers in the Arabic Union. Bethmann was made secretary of the special committee to assist the Seventh-day Adventist Church in its understanding of mission among Muslims. The difficulty faced by missionaries in that region required new approaches. In this vein, and as Walter K. Ising, chair of the committee, reported,

a cooperative organization was formed at our recent general workers' meeting at Jerusalem, which is to be composed of all our workers. As the matter took concrete form only during the latter part of this gathering, a committee of three was appointed, composed of the writer and Erich Bethmann, of Transjordan, and Willy Lesovsky, of Lebanon-Syria, to draw up a plan for systematic study of this complex problem. Shortly after the conference a circular letter was sent out to our workers with suggestions as to the method to be adopted.[6]

After the 1935 meeting, Bethmann, together with Lesovsky, completed a summer course at the Newman School for Missions at Jerusalem. There, Bethmann was sponsored to conduct research including the advanced study of the Koran.[7] This broadened his mission horizon and approach to Muslims. According to Kilgore, his biographer, while Bethmann served as a missionary at Al-Husn and Irbid in Jordan and at Mosul and Baghdad in Iraq,

Increasingly, he found himself fascinated by the rich variety of religious and ethnic groups in Iraq. In a general comment on religious sects, including the Christian sects of East and West, he observes that many adherents are less attached to a particular dogma than to seeing themselves as "different' from others.[8]

Second World War and Move to America

Bethmann was serving in Iraq when the Second World War broke out. On the eve of the outbreak, the Adventist administration did as much as possible to evacuate all missionaries. However, Bethmann and H. C. Rieckmann could not get out.[9] As German citizens, the British Army interned them. Bethmann himself was taken prisoner on September 4, 1939, in Baghdad.[10] He was moved to India the same year and held there until 1946. "With nothing much else to do, he taught himself Urdu and polished his French, English, and Arabic so that, by the end of the war, he was fluent in five languages."[11]

Zora Bethmann, their five-year-old daughter, and two older sons took refuge in Bavaria, Germany, where they lived under desperate conditions until 1945.[12] When Bethmann was released at the end of the war, plans were made for him to be employed either in India or in Southern Asia.[13] When these plans never materialized,[14] the General Conference helped him move to the United States where he began working as a research assistant with the Review and Herald Publishing Association at the General Conference headquarters in Takoma Park, Maryland, in connection with Leroy E. Froom's work, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*.

While awaiting a call to go back to the Middle East, Bethmann attended the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary starting in 1947 and completed an MA degree.[15] During this time (circa 1949), he was able to reunite

with his family after ten years apart. However, the separation had taken a toll on the family. As a result, Erich and Zora Bethmann were divorced.[16]

In 1949, after he had completed the work he was doing with the Review and Herald Publishing Association, and in view of his family situation, the GC decided not to place him on a call to return to the Middle East.[17] He was assigned a role at the GC in translating literature into Arabic for mission use in the Middle East.[18] Since Bethmann was not regular worker at the GC, he applied for a vacancy at the Library of Congress.[19] Bethmann did not get the job.

Bridge to Islam

In 1950, as part of a General Conference-sponsored mission series, the Southern Publishing Association published Bethmann's *Bridge to Islam*.[20] The book was a distillation of his 20 years of mission service in the Middle East, combined with his knowledge of Arabic language, culture, and Christianity in the Middle East. Although the book had a chapter on the history of Adventism in the Middle East, in the preface, Bethmann commented that the book was written "to arouse an interest, stimulate thinking, and, if possible, to kindle the desire for further investigation and awaken the urge to make a contribution to a solution" towards the challenge of Islam.[21]

Among Adventists, the book was widely praised. It was made part of the ministerial reading course for Adventists in 1950. In *The Ministry*, it was advertised as

a book which leads you into the midst of this fierce combat, and urges you on to rethink your own position. At the same time it carries you leisurely through the countries of the Near East, stops at many strange places, pictures the multicolored life of the East, and instills a love for its people. It arouses the reader from his lukewarmness, challenges his faith, and inspires for greater sacrifice.[22]

The Signs of the Times declared that the book clarified the Muslim problem.[23] A promotion of the book in the Australasian *Record* submitted,

In *Bridge to Islam* we have a detailed study of that part of the world which is almost totally Moslem. This is a study of the founder of Islam, the beliefs of his followers, and of the great gulf that exists between the Moslem world and Christianity. Bridge to Islam is not just a mission story-though it does devote an interesting chapter to the advent message in Islam but it is a book that depicts the great panorama of the tremendous struggle between the two great religious forces, Christianity and Islam.[24]

Outside Adventist circles, *Bridge to Islam* received favorable welcome. Aside from being mentioned in *The Christian Century* index of 1952,[25] in addition to several other constructive assessments,[26] a review by the Dutch theologian and missiologist Hendrik Kraemer gave it a positive evaluation in the *International Review of Mission.*

American Friends of the Middle East

Around 1951, after Bethman left the employment of the General Conference,[28] he joined the American Friends of the Middle East (AFME). His decision to do so was instigated through a meeting with the famous journalist, Dorothy Thompson, widow of Nobel-prizewinning novelist Sinclair Lewis and long-time passionate advocate of a Jewish state in Palestine. Bethmann and Thompson had met in the late 1940s to "discuss establishing an organization to improve understanding between the peoples of the Middle East and Americans."[29] In 1951, when the AFME was formed, Bethmann became AFME's director of research and publication.[30] As a private, non-profit cultural organization, AFME was a cultural think tank that primarily encouraged educational exchange for students and professors and stimulated Americans to experience the Middle East first hand.[31]

Until his retirement, Bethmann worked for AFME. As the organization grew in the 1950s and 1960s with field offices across the Arab world, "Bethmann put his expertise to work in its Washington headquarters, and took great pride in the organization's increasing impact on all aspects of US-Middle East relations."[32] During his time, Bethmann also published other books: *Decisive Years in Palestine, 1918–1948*;[33] *The Fate of Muslims Under Soviet Rule*;[34] *Yemen on the Threshold*;[35] and *Steps towards Understanding Islam*.[36]

Later Life

In 1967, Bethmann retired after an article was released by the defunct *Ramparts Magazine* under publisher Martin Peretz. The article provoked an uproar among academics. It charged AFME as a pro-Arabist organization among "a number of educational, labor and student organizations that received covert financial support from the Central Intelligence Agency."[37]

Bethmann lived in Washington for the rest of his life. He was a stamp collector and a member of the American Philatelic Society. He died of stroke on June 26, 1993, at Washington Hospital Center.[38]

Contribution

Erich Bethmann served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a missionary, linguist, scholar, and researcher. As a missionary, he worked for twenty years in Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. As a linguist, he translated Adventist literature from Arabic to English and vice versa. As a researcher and scholar, he helped both Adventists and the wider Christian missionary enterprise by providing a deeper understanding of Arabic culture as well as how to do missions among Muslims. Not only was his *Bridge to Islam* an anthropological work in its own right, it was a well-received contribution to studies in Islam.

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_____. to Capt. Robert L. March, August 13, 1946. Correspondences, Box 6749, General Conference Archives.

_____. to J. I. Robinson, April 2, 1946. Correspondences, Box 6749, General Conference Archives.

_____. to Luther E. Evans, April 8, 1949. Correspondences, Box 6749, General Conference Archives.

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“The Book Nook.” *The Record*, May 24, 1950.

NOTES

1. Andrew L. Killgore, “A Lifelong Servant of Truth,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, May/June 1991, 41, accessed July 9, 2019, https://www.wrmea.org/1991-may-june/erich-waldemar-bethmann-a-lifelong-servant-of-truth.html.

2. “Missionary Sailing,” *Quarterly Review of the European Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*, second Quarter, 1925, 5.

3. Although Andrew L. Killgore has dated this to 1927, the *Adventist Yearbook* of 1926 mentions Bethmann as a missionary in Egypt which means he was there from 1925. See “Egyptian Mission,” *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1926), 138. See also the *Quarterly Review* of 1925.

4. Killgore, “A Lifelong Servant of Truth,” 41.

5. Walter K. Ising, “Advancing in Transjordan,” *ARH*, August 8, 1935, 13.

6. Walter K. Ising, “Preparing for Work among Moslems,” *ARH*, November 14, 1935, 12.

7. Ibid., 13.

8. Killgore, “A Lifelong Servant of Truth,” 41

9. Arthur Whitefield Spalding, *Origin and History of Seventh-day Adventists*, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962), 111.

10. W. P. Bradley, "Autumn Council Proceedings," *ARH*, December 5, 1946, 3.

11. Killgore, "A Lifelong Servant of Truth," 41; see also Walter K. Ising to Bethmann, January 7, 1942, Correspondences, Box 6749, General Conference Archives.

12. It was difficult for Zora Bethmann and her three children to find food in Germany and they received parcels from the United States. See Zora Bethmann to Ising, March 5, 1946; Walter K. Ising, to Capt. Robert L. March, August 13, 1946, Correspondences, Box 6749, General Conference Archives, Maryland.

13. See the following letters: E. W. Bethmann to W. K. Ising, September 23, 1945, J. I. Robinson to W. K. Ising, October 1, 1945, Correspondences, Box 6749, General Conference Archives.

14. The leadership in the Southern Asia Division had doubts about Bethmann and his political views. Although Ising wrote a letter to counter such rumors, there was no action on it. See Walter K. Ising to J. I. Robinson, April 2, 1946, Correspondences, Box 6749, General Conference Archives.

15. "Ministerial Book-A-Month Reading Course for September," *The Ministry*, September 1950, 26.

16. Killgore, "A Lifelong Servant of Truth," 41.

17. General Conference Committee, November 28, 1949, 1712, General Conference Archives, accessed April 8, 2019, http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1949-11.pdf.

18. General Conference Committee, October 3, 1949, 1610, General Conference Archives, accessed April 8, 2019, http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1949-10.pdf

19. In this vein, Walter K. Ising, then General Conference Field Secretary, wrote a recommendation letter for Bethmann asking the Librarian to consider Bethmann able to fill in the post of Chief of the Near East Section of the Orientalia Division in the Library of Congress.Walter K. Ising to Luther E. Evans, April 8, 1949, Correspondences, Box 6749, General Conference Archives, Maryland.

20. Erich W. Bethmann, *Bridge to Islam: A Study of Religious Forces of Islam and Christianity in the Near East* (Nashville, Tennessee: Southern Publishing Association, 1950).

21. Ibid., Preface.

22. "Reading Course Books," *The Ministry*, March 1950, 25.

23. See Marian M. Hay, "The Riddle of Islam," *Signs of the Times*, September 24, 1951, 1

24. See "The Book Nook," *The Record*, May 24, 1950, 11.

25. *The Christian Century*, 69, no. 26 (June 25, 1952):762-767.

26. For instance, Edwin E. Calverley, *Journal of Bible and Religion* 19, no. 1 (1951): 47 and Garland Evans Hopkins, "Middle East Reaches Print," *The Christian Century* 69, no. 6 (1952): 159.

27. Hendrik Kraemer, "Studies of Islam," *International Review of Mission* 40, no. 158 (1951): 223–224.

28. The General Conference "VOTED, That in view of circumstances that prevent his continuing in the organized work, the services of E. Bethmann, who has been on the General Conference payroll for some time, be terminated as from March 31, 1951." General Conference Committee, April 2, 1951, 351, General Conference Archives, accessed April 8, 2019, http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCC/GCC1951-04-SM.pdf.

29. Killgore, 41.

30. For a detailed overview, see Nick Grover, "Neoliberal Modernizers: The American Friends of the Middle East and Its Subversion of Arab Nationalism, 1951-67" (MA thesis, Queen's University, Ontario, 2018).

31. Kilgore, 41. C.f. "Dorothy Thompson's 'American Friends of the Middle East' Outlines Program; Seeks Funds," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 28, 1951, 4, accessed, April 10, 2019, https://www.jta.org/1951/06/28/archive/dorothy-thompsons-american-friends-of-the-middle-east-outlines-program-seeks-funds.

32. Killgore, 41.

33. Erich W. Bethmann, *Decisive Years in Palestine, 1918-1948*, (New York: American Friends of the Middle East, 1957).

34. Erich W. Bethmann, *The Fate of Muslims Under Soviet Rule*, (New York: American Friends of the Middle East, 1958).

35. Erich W. Bethmann, *Yemen on the Threshold*, (Washington, DC: American Friends of the Middle East, 1960).

36. Erich W. Bethmann, *Steps Toward Understanding Islam*. (Washington: American Friends of the Middle East, 1966).

37. Ibid.

38. See "Missionary, Researcher Erich W. Bethmann Dies," Washington Post, July 2, 1993, accessed February 20, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1993/07/02/missionary-researcher-erich-w-bethmann-dies/b8793f02-8ec6-4537-ab5e-cbb54e7f3ab1/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1fe138a12722.

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